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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000577

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM VE
SUBJECT: CARTER CENTER/OAS RAISE CONCERN WITH DAS DESHAZO

REF: CARACAS 552

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) WHA DAS Peter DeShazo expressed USG support for the OAS and the Carter Center in a lunch on February 16 for representatives of both organizations hosted by the Ambassador. OAS Chief of Staff Fernando Jaramillo said it is clear the National Electoral Council (CNE) is attempting to invalidate as many signatures as possible to terminate the recall referendum petition against President Chavez. Noting that the CNE cut off information after the OAS-Carter Center statement of February 14, Jaramillo expressed doubt that the observation mission could continue under such conditions. Carter Center representative Francisco Diez said his organization had also been told that requests for information must be made in writing and be approved by the CNE board. Diez said the situation of the observers is precarious. DeShazo emphasized the importance of both institutions to ensuring the transparency of the process. End summary.

OAS Chief Doubtful of Mission Success

¶2. (C) The Ambassador hosted a lunch on February 16 for WHA DAS Peter DeShazo to hear from representatives of the OAS and Carter Center about the signature verification process at the National Electoral Council (CNE). The OAS was represented by OAS SYG Gaviria's Chief of Staff Fernando Jaramillo, OAS country representative Patricio Carbacho, OAS head observer Edgardo Ries, and OAS observer Marcelo Alvarez. Francisco Diez and Andres Araya represented the Carter Center. DCM, Polcouns, and poloff also attended.

¶3. (C) Jaramillo said he sees no purpose in the OAS mission remaining in Venezuela. He said CNE President Francisco Carrasquero launched into a tirade against him on February 13 after the OAS and Carter Center made a joint statement pointing out that excessive technicalities were delaying the signature count process. (Jaramillo also noted that the February 13 statement said that the observers had not seen evidence of fraud in the process, a poke at the GOV's contention that the opposition was engaged in "megafraud.") Jaramillo said that since then OAS observers had been cut off from information from CNE mid-level officials with requests now having to go through the CNE board.

¶4. (C) Jaramillo asserted that from the point when the CNE changed the rules halfway through the physical verification of the presidential signature forms, the CNE has tried to invalidate as many signatures as possible. The "planillas planas" issue (signature forms that were apparently filled out by one person but signed by another) is a clear example of this strategy, he said. Jaramillo said it was likely the CNE board's decision on which criteria to apply to the "planas" would be decisive, though he thought it likely the CNE would put off that decision until the last. Jaramillo noted that when the CNE's self-appointed deadline of February 29 arrives, the CNE will not/not be ready to make announcement regarding the referendum.

¶5. (C) Acknowledging that he was brainstorming, Jaramillo said the OAS could not sit back and wait for the process to be pronounced dead. Their credibility as observers would be at stake if they simply continued to go along, attesting to procedures that ran counter to the spirit of recognized electoral and legal concepts, he noted. Asked by the Ambassador if his views reflected OAS SYG Gaviria's perspective on the situation, Jaramillo said yes. Diez cautioned that any decision by the observers to curtail activities should be based on actions, not fears of what decisions will be made. Diez said President Carter would likely agree that if the CNE refused to provide access and

information necessary for completing the mission, the Carter

Center would have to withdraw.

Carter Center Still On the Good Side

16. (C) Francisco Diez said the CNE was probably more angry at the OAS than the Carter Center, but noted that access to information had also become more complicated. Diez said that on February 14, an "informal flow of information" at the mid-level that Carter Center was using to extract samples from the signature forms was cut off. Diez conceded that written permission made sense and immediately submitted the request to the CNE board. He said the Carter Center had collected only half of the signature forms needed for the statistical sample when access was cut. (Note: Diez and Jaramillo met with the CNE on February 17 and told reporters they had discussed with the CNE directors ideas for how to proceed with their observation mission, noting they would follow up in writing shortly.)

17. (C) Regarding the CNE's announcement that it would invite additional international observers, most believed it would not help the process. Jaramillo noted that no reputable observers would join the process in mid-stream. He did not preclude the possibility that the GOV would find personalities that would be nonetheless willing to lend themselves to the affair. Diez said he had suggested to the CNE "for the sixth time" that they extend an invitation to the UNDP; the board refused. (Note: Opposition groups also called for the UNDP's involvement, as they are part of the tripartite committee that facilitated the May 29 agreement.)

Support For OAS/TCC

18. (C) DAS DeShazo briefed the observers on his meetings with Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and ambassadors of interested countries (septels). He told the observers the USG fully supports their work "in the trenches" on helping Venezuela reach a solution to the political impasse.

Comment

19. (C) The situation for the electoral observation mission is deteriorating. The GOV has taken a hostile position toward the international observers, whom they portray as a threat to the credibility of the CNE's ability to block the referendum. The situation could improve if and only if Chavez were to change his approach. The observers are still in place and CNE directors still speak with the observer chiefs. The CNE's ruling on the "planillas planas," which has been once again postponed, will give an indication as to the CNE's -- and Chavez's -- determination to fulfill its mission in a transparent manner.

10. (C) It is encouraging that OAS and the Carter Center are willing to take action sooner rather than later. If they don't act while the patient still has a chance of pulling through, their report is likely to be a coroner's report on the cause of death.

11. (U) DAS DeShazo cleared this cable.
SHAPIRO

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